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WASHINGTON POST
12 January 1986

War Rends Fabric of Afghan Society

First of five articles

By James Rupert
Special to The Washington Post

JERAGHTU-YE-WARDAK, Afghanistan—"It's shameful," said Abdurrahman, "that we cannot offer you, as our guest, any better food than this, but times are very difficult."

Gesturing, as he spoke, toward a dinner of bread, rice and a little meat spread on a cloth on the floor, Abdurrahman smiled sadly. A spry, bearded man of about 65, Abdurrahman is a leading elder of a tiny hamlet of 10 families near here.

With most of the village's older men, we sat in the best room of Abdurrahman's house, on cushions ranged along the four whitewashed walls of mud and straw. Abdurrahman had guided me carefully to the best seat and had tucked the house's best pillow behind my back.

Traveling through southern Wardak Province, I had appeared in the village unannounced, with a small escort of *mujaheddin* (Afghan resistance fighters), and Abdurrahman immediately had asked us to spend the night at his house.

Before dinner, two boys from the family had brought the inevitable steaming kettles, asking, "*Tor chai ya chin chai* (black tea or green tea)?".

After six years of brutal, desperate warfare against the high technology and massed firepower of the Soviet Army and Air Force, Afghans such as the hospitable men of Abdurrahman's village can give a visitor the impression that, at its core, Afghanistan remains unchanged.

Despite the inescapable evidence of physical destruction—the gaping bomb and missile craters in orchards, houses and irrigation canals—Afghanistan's villagers, joking and talking softly at night in the dim glow of kerosene lanterns in their homes, suggest that the old and finely woven fabric of their society has survived untorn.

It is not so.

For all the Afghans' impressive resilience as individuals, and for all the binding power of their traditions, their social fabric is being rewoven by this war. It is happening in ways that are difficult for outsiders to see, and that leave even Afghans uncertain about the future of their society.

A month's travel in several southeastern provinces of Afghanistan, and several weeks of interviews in Pakistan with Afghans and others, indicate clearly that two important changes among Afghans since the Soviet invasion are a growing sense of nationalism and a new concern for politics.

Surrounded by deserts and the rugged peaks of the Hindu Kush, Afghanistan entered the 1980s as an isolated country of villagers and nomads, separated from each other by their mountains and by ethnic, linguistic and tribal differences.

As with many rural populations in the Third World, Afghans were largely unconcerned with the political activities of their country's elite in the distant capital and traditionally had rebelled against the government's efforts to extend its influence into the countryside.

Now, war has uprooted as many as one-third of Afghanistan's people, forcing them to abandon their homes and flee to other parts of the country, or to Pakistan or Iran, as refugees. Large sections of this insular population have been "instantly urbanized" in crowded refugee camps in Pakistan that hold between 2 and 3 million Afghans.

A New Class of Leaders

Six years after the Soviet invasion that linked the lives of common Afghans to the forces of world politics, even the uneducated and illiterate (the vast majority) appear newly attentive to political questions, both among themselves and internationally.

During my month of travel, Afghans frequently were eager to discuss politics at length—although usually all discussion stopped for the nightly BBC broadcasts in Persian and Pashtu, Afghanistan's main languages.

"Even if they're not used to thinking about politics, people who have suffered such terrible things start to ask *why* these things happen to them—and so they start to talk about politics," a young Afghan Moslem fundamentalist said.

And whether men like the hospitable Abdurrahman concede it or not—and many do not—their own authority as the traditional chiefs of this rural society is slowly slipping away into the grasp of men who represent an anomaly in Afghan history: young leaders.

In a country where, for centuries, men have wielded authority because of their age, religious training, wealth or lineage, a new class of leaders is emerging. Largely in their twenties and thirties, these men—the field commanders of the resistance—gather followers because they can successfully organize and lead a 20th-century guerrilla *jihad* (holy war) against the occupying Soviet Army.

Since early in the war, the young commanders have taken over battlefield authority from the traditional leaders. Now, such commanders are taking on civil authority as well, overseeing rural schools and hospitals and arbitrating local disputes once handled by traditional tribal leaders or landlords.

Evolution of a War

The weight and pressures of war—now longer and fiercer than anyone had expected—against a 20th-century superpower have bent and buckled the social traditions built by generations of Moslem farmers and shepherds in these harsh Central Asian steppes and mountains. As it has changed Afghanistan, the war itself has evolved also.

When the Soviets invaded in December 1979 to supplant Afghanistan's indigenous Communist government, there were widespread predictions that they would quickly crush the disorganized mujaheddin. But more than six years later, the military combat is more intense and more sophisticated. Soviet strategy has evolved to carry the conflict to new battlefields, aiming to destroy the resistance at its roots in the countryside and to capture the cul-

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tural identity and loyalties of the rising generation of Afghans.

Last winter, hospitals in Pakistan for Afghan war casualties remained full, as fighting continued through months that in previous years had provided lulls in combat. Since then, the two sides have fought some of their largest and longest battles of the war. Each has conceded higher casualties in the past year—an unusual admission for the Soviets.

In interviews, many mujahed commanders admitted difficulties in coping with new Soviet tactics, such as their dropping antiguerrilla forces by helicopter onto high ground from which they can ambush mujahed caravans and attack bases.

The Soviets also have increased their subversion. They promote conflict among the many Afghan resistance groups and use Afghan agents to help them find and kill effective resistance commanders.

The evolution of the combat, and especially the loss of mujahed commanders, leads some analysts to worry that the Soviets may be gaining a battlefield advantage, which, while it does not give them hope of an outright military victory, may yet weaken the resistance and permit Moscow to reduce its costs in the war.

The Soviets attribute their higher casualties through most of 1985 to the mujaheddin's use of heavier weapons.

New weapons—many reportedly supplied by a covert CIA program—are arriving in Afghanistan, although many are lost through corruption along the pipeline.

Despite its changes, the military battle in Afghanistan remains much as it has been reported in the past few years by the few western journalists who have traveled inside. The mujaheddin, fighting with impressive courage and inferior weapons, are deadlocked with the technologically superior Soviets.

Although they control as much as 90 percent of Afghanistan, the guerrillas cannot dislodge the Soviet and Afghan government bases in the country's major towns. With their relatively light weapons, the mujaheddin can only try to harass such bases and their supply convoys, hoping to raise the Soviets' human and economic costs from the occupation.

The mujaheddin continue to lack not only heavy weapons, but also effective air defenses. More importantly, in the view of many mujaheddin and others, the guerrillas still need even basic training and do not really know how to use some of the weapons being supplied to them.

The concerns of resistance leaders and Afghan intellectuals now reflect the expansion of the war to its new battlefields, and the implications of these new fronts for Afghan society.

Choking Off Support

Increasingly, over the past two years, the Soviets have tried to choke off civilian support for the guerrillas simply by emptying the villages of their inhabitants. This has been one of their most brutal campaigns, including killings of unarmed villagers, the destruction of farms and irrigation canals, and the mining of villages and homes.

In the small part of Afghanistan toured recently, both the breadth and the success of this strategy were clear. Local residents in 20 of 32 villages visited said they had been bombed, shelled or attacked by Soviet or Afghan government ground forces. Many pointed out unexploded bombs and destroyed homes.

The other 12 villages, in the Zermat region of Paktia Province, were eerily abandoned, with cratered paths, crumbling walls and doors open wide into silent houses. An independent human rights report covering much of the same territory said that half of 8,000 village households surveyed had been abandoned.

In this new battle for the survival of the villages, the mujaheddin are fighting back, but they are hampered by their lack of money and trained professionals.

"The jihad depends on the villagers, so we must keep them on the land," explained Amin Wardak, a guerrilla commander in Wardak Province. "So we try to provide medical care, we run schools, we try to help the farmers," he said.

Despite efforts like Wardak's, much of Afghanistan's society of villagers has been transformed into a society of refugees, suddenly thrown into sprawling camps of tents and mud buildings in Pakistan and Iran. Other Afghans have fled their homes for safer parts of the country, notably the Soviet-controlled capital, Kabul.

It is largely among these suddenly urbanized populations that still another battlefield has opened, in classrooms and mosques, for Afghanistan's very culture.

In an apparent attempt to mold a loyal pro-Soviet elite to help run the country, the Soviets have remodeled the Afghan education system and have taken children to be brought up in the Soviet Union.

The Soviets also are reinterpreting Afghanistan's Islamic faith, and in the past year they have installed government-trained mullahs in many of the mosques under their control.

The Soviets govern only a small part of the population, a fact that limits their ability to redesign the country's culture.

But in the cultural battle, the resistance, too, is severely handicapped. Even before the Soviet invasion, Afghanistan was, like so many Third World and Islamic countries, struggling to establish its own national identity—and the resistance remains divided on what it means to be Afghan.

It was, in part, the cultural divide between Afghanistan's tradition-bound countryside and its modernizing elite in Kabul that led to the Soviet invasion.

During the 1960s and '70s, segments of the educated elite, including the tiny Afghan Communist Party, found their ambitions frustrated by the monopoly on power of the traditional monarchy and grew impatient at its slow pace toward western-style modernization.

From 1973 to 1978, successive coups by members of this elite, backed by the Army, led to the takeover by a group of home-grown Communists in April 1978 in the "Saur Revolution," named for the month in which it occurred.

The takeover surprised Moscow, which had been getting along well with the nonaligned government of Mohammed Daud. Both promonarchy traditionalists and Moslem fundamentalists began leading a jihad against Kabul.

The rebellion spread nationwide when the first Communist regime tried to force radical changes—such as mandatory classes in Communist doctrine, compulsory schooling for girls and an end to the bride price—on the nation's villagers. By Christmas 1979, with the first Afghan Communist ruler assassinated and the resistance growing in strength, the Soviets intervened with 100,000 troops and installed Babrak Karmal as president.

"Afghanistan can never go back to the way it was," said Mohammed es'Haq, a political officer of the Jamiat-i-Islami (Islamic Society) party. "The war has broken the two pillars—the bureaucrats and the landlords—which used to run the country" under the monarchy, he said.

New Political Awareness

Es'Haq and others believe that several of the social changes wrought by the war are helping to forge a new sense of nationalism and a new politicization. The resistance is now gathered into seven "major" political parties (those recognized by the Pakistani government) and numerous other factions.

Es'Haq regards the simple existence of large political parties as a revolutionary change. Although for many people in Afghanistan and in the refugee camps the parties are little more than meaningless labels, Es'Haq argues that they represent an unprecedented effort to appeal across traditional ethnic and tribal divides.

Virtually all Afghans interviewed agreed that nationalism is growing. "It's natural, with the war," said Najib, a French-trained agronomist who returned to organize agricultural development projects in Wardak Province.

Asking not to be identified further to protect family in Soviet-held Kabul, Najib said, "The Soviets have created the same problems for everyone, and people can't explain it by reference to old-fashioned tribalism. Instead, we see this war and our suffering through the lens of Islam."

As numerous scholars point out, Afghans traditionally have identified—and defended—themselves and their country in terms of Islam.

The Soviets are not the first outside power to spawn a jihad with an invasion of Afghanistan. Starting in 1838, Britain fought three wars in an effort to dominate Afghanistan and protect its Indian colony to the south.

"This war is completely different," according to Es'Haq. "The British weren't . . . trying to Britishize or Christianize our country; but the Soviets are trying to completely erase our identity—especially our Islamic identity," he said.

"Also, war itself has changed," he said. "The Anglo-Afghan wars did not affect the whole country at the same time . . . . No place in Afghanistan is escaping this war."

A broad range of Afghans agreed that, as a people, they had become more interested in politics—especially their own national politics—and that this was one of the most important changes in their country since the Soviet invasion.

"Before the Communists, people didn't care about the government in Kabul," explained Abdul Haq, a prominent mujahed commander in Kabul for the Younis Khales faction of the Hezb-i-Islami (Islamic Party). "The Afghan people used to accept any regime, as long as it did not make problems for them. But it's not like that now," he said.

'Is That Good for Us?'

Shortly after a frosty sunrise on Nov. 22, in a village near here, several mujaheddin and I breakfasted with a small group of local men, while the voice of President Reagan, broadcast by the Voice of America, filled the room. Reagan was addressing a joint session of Congress following his summit meeting with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev.

My Afghan hosts listened to Reagan's speech and asked what he had said. Told that the two leaders planned to exchange visits, one man asked, "Is that good for us?"

The question seemed to symbolize a new realization among Afghans after years of war: that their own lives are tied to distant political events and to the world's opinion about their country and its plight.

Afghans also often asked about outside impressions of their country. Often, the answers disappointed them—as though, having taken a new interest in world affairs, they felt ignored in return.

As one young mujahed conducted a tour of his village north of here, he asked what Americans thought of the various Afghan guerrilla leaders. When told that most Americans would not recognize names such as Gulbuddin Hekmatyar or Nabi Mohammadi, he seemed surprised.

"But why not?" he asked. "We know who Reagan is."

NEXT: Sovietizing Afghanistan

BY JAMES RUPERT FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

"The jihad [holy war] depends on the villagers, so we must keep them on the land," says Amin Wardak, a guerrilla commander in Wardak Province.

Guerrilla Commanders Take Charge

Traditional Afghan Leaders Give Way to Younger Men

MARKAZ-I-BARAKAT, Afghanistan—Ismail stands astride a massive motorcycle that mutters in neutral. With his thick mustache, lantern jaw and wavy black hair flowing past his shoulders, he looks set to play in a Hollywood movie about the Hell's Angels.

But, at 28, Ismail is an ex-farmer, now second in command at this *markaz*, or guerrilla base, of the National Islamic Front of Afghanistan in northern Ghazni Province. Ismail is neither a landlord, nor a member of an elite family, nor a religious authority figure; traditional Afghanistan would not have called him from his farm to be a leader—especially not at his age.

But traditional Afghanistan is eroding under the pressures of more than six years of Soviet occupation, and, inside the country, the leadership of the young is perhaps the most obvious evidence of this society's forced evolution. Here, where age always has been a main criterion for leadership, the dozen field commanders encountered during a recent trip had an average age of 31, and none was older than 40.

According to the other mujaheddin here, Ismail is a leader because he is courageous and because he learns quickly how to use weapons and solve the problems of their continuing battle with Soviet troops based in the nearby town of Ghazni.

"I was a poor man," said Ismail, "and I never went to school. But I learned by myself how to read and write—and any weapon I see, I try to learn it as quickly as possible."

Various young commanders interviewed during the one-month visit to Afghanistan said the burden of leadership inside the country has shifted to them because of the mental—and physical—challenges of the war.

"We can't fight by pushing buttons," said Kabul commander Abdul Haq, in his late twenties. "We fight by walking for days, and with no food and in the snow," he said. "Our fight is for young men."

According to another mujahed leader, Ruhani Wardak, 24, "when the war began, many of the older, traditional leaders were in charge at first, the religious leaders and tribal chiefs."

"But the younger men were best at learning what we had to do to fight the Soviets with their tanks and helicopters," he said.

The shift in leadership on the battlefield has not changed the Afghans' traditional respect for age. Within the guerrilla bases, young commanders were unfailingly respectful to the older men they led—but the commanders' authority was never questioned.

Many of the traditional leaders of Afghanistan's villages, the tribal chiefs and landlords, were chased from their homes under the Afghan Communist governments that preceded the Soviet invasion. Now, authority in the villages is often shared among the young commanders and the older men who remain.

In this region, there are few young men left in the villages, most having gone to the guerrilla bases or to neighboring Pakistan to seek work. In the villages, the authority of the elders remains strong—but local residents said in cases of disputes among such older men, or between villages, a local commander might be asked to arbitrate.

Virtually all the commanders interviewed insisted that they continue to rely on the older leaders for direction and that their own influence would not eclipse that of the traditional elite. In the villages, the need for cooperation between influential elders and the young commanders was clear: The mujaheddin, like any guerrilla movement, rely on the population for material support and information.

The commanders inside Afghanistan also depend on the leaders of the Afghan political parties, based in Peshawar, for weapons and supplies. Most party leaders are older men, with traditional religious or hereditary claims to leadership.

Western observers and many mujaheddin agree that influence and authority in the resistance are shifting gradually from the older and more ideological elites represented by the party leaders to the younger and often more pragmatic battlefield commanders.

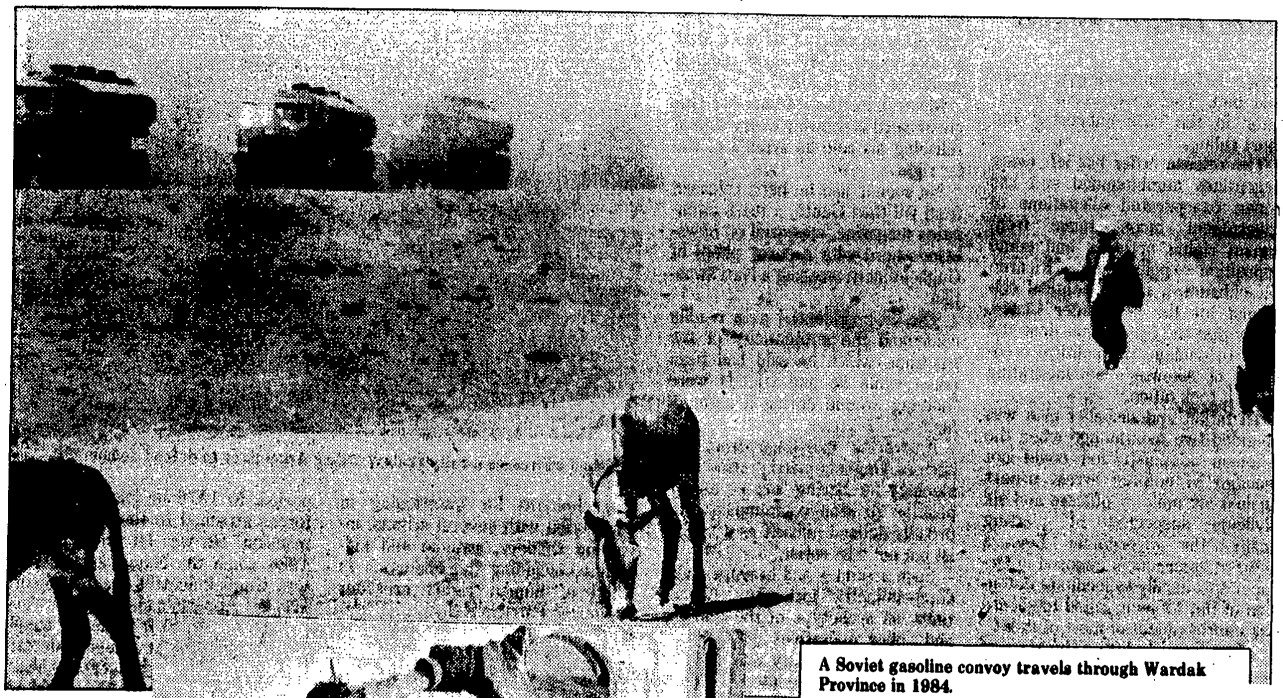
Amin Wardak, older brother of Ruhani, says the commanders have remained in closer touch with Afghans in the country than have the party leaders—and will press increasingly for a role in the broader leadership of the movement. Just over a century ago, when an earlier generation of Afghans fought an invading British army, one of Amin Wardak's forbears, Mohamed-Djan Wardak, led the fight on the battlefield but then relinquished any claim to power.

"That is not going to happen this time," Wardak said.

A British anthropologist working inside Afghanistan, who asked not to be named, suggested that the commanders' pragmatism may help them increase their influence. "In the field, the commanders seem better able to cooperate in practical ways than the parties do politically," he said.

Also, the commanders "are more open to the outside and potentially [are] a bridge between the West and Afghanistan's conservative Moslems," he said. "But like the other changes in this country, it's difficult to predict the implications of something we can only partially see."

— James Rupert



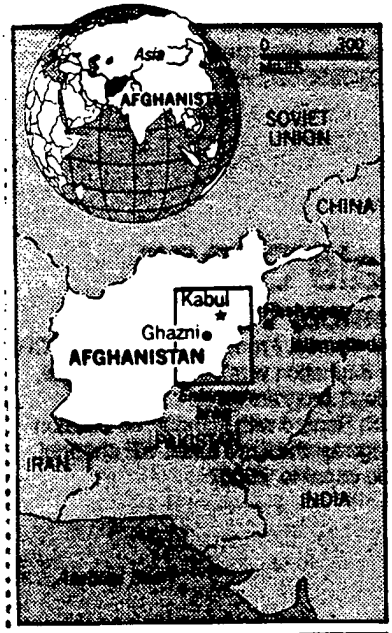
A Soviet gasoline convoy travels through Wardak Province in 1984.

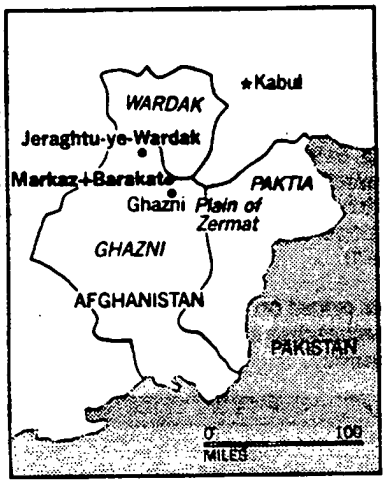
SYGMA

BY JAMES RUPERT FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Itinerant barber shaves guerrilla in a village in southern Wardak Province.

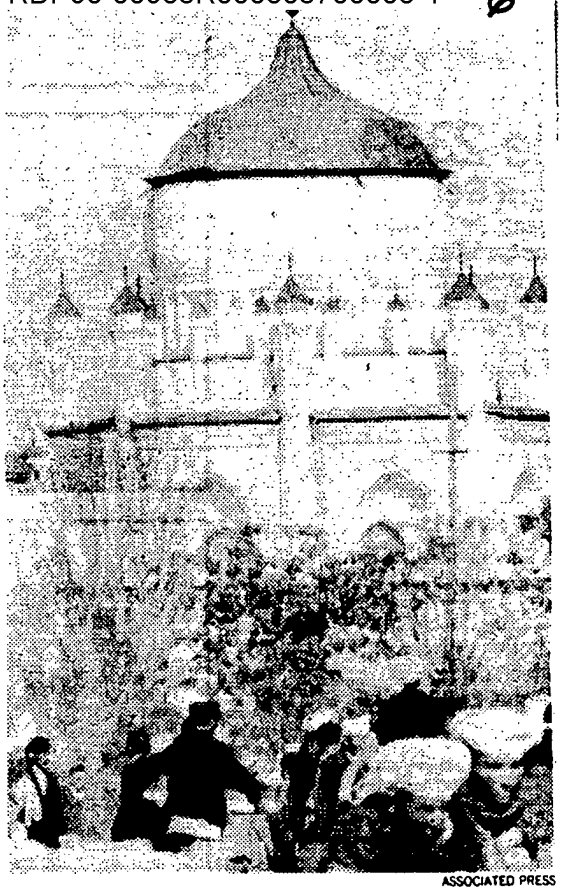
THE BATTLE FOR AFGHAN CULTURE





BY CLARICE BORIO—THE WASHINGTON POST

Another battlefield has opened, in classrooms and mosques, for Afghanistan's very culture. The Soviets have remodeled the Afghan education system and are reinterpreting the country's Islamic faith, in part by installing Soviet-trained mullahs in mosques in areas the invaders control. The defense of their culture has awakened a new sense of nationalism among Afghans. Surrounded by deserts and the rugged peaks of the Hindu Kush, Afghanistan entered the 1980s as an isolated country of villages and nomads, separated by ethnic, linguistic and tribal differences.



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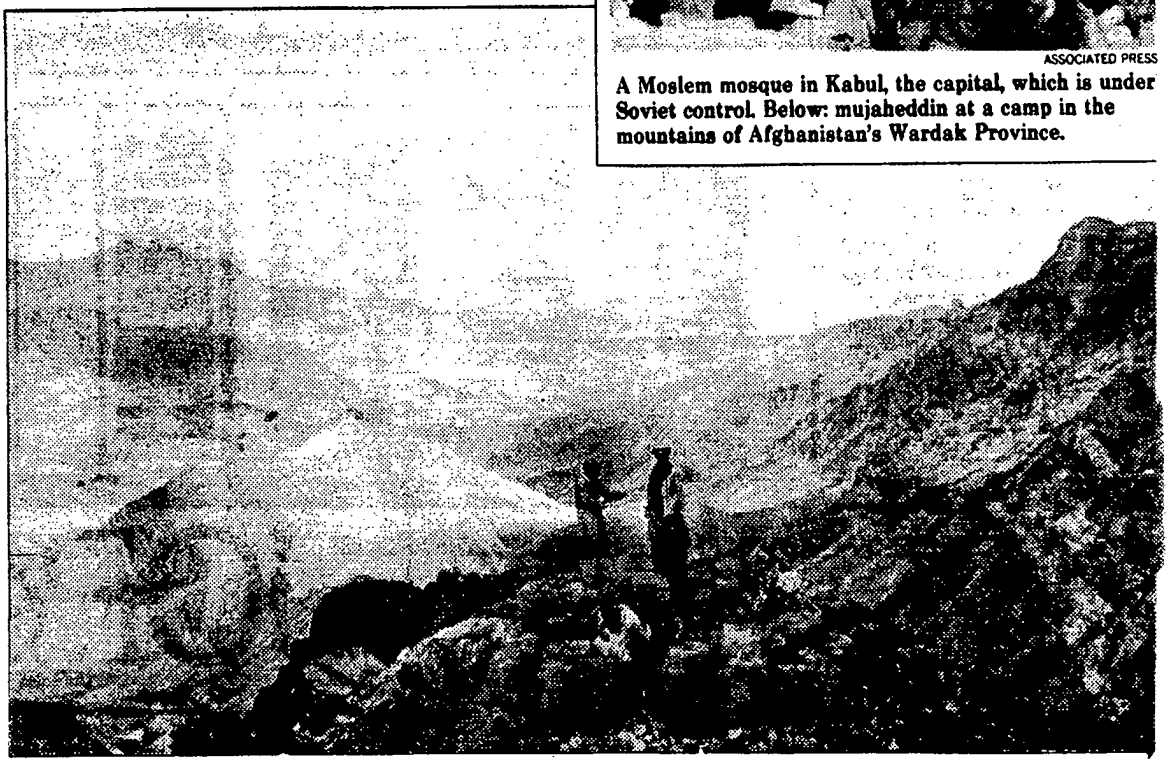
A Moslem mosque in Kabul, the capital, which is under Soviet control. Below: mujaheddin at a camp in the mountains of Afghanistan's Wardak Province.



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THE BATTLE FOR AFGHAN VILLAGES

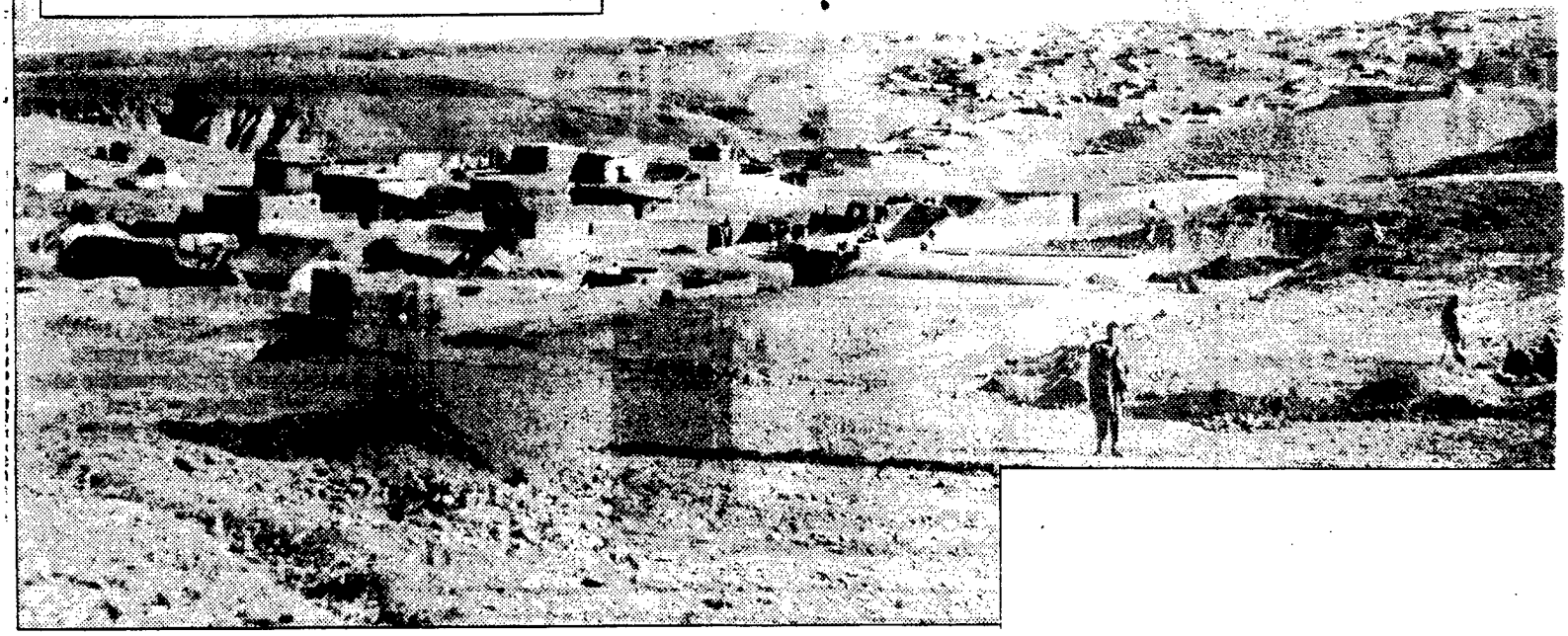
The Soviets have tried to choke off civilian support for the guerrillas by emptying villages; residents in 20 of 32 villages visited said they had been bombed, shelled or attacked by the Soviets or Afghan government forces. As a result, much of Afghanistan's society of villagers has been transformed into a society of refugees in camps in Pakistan and Iran; others have fled to safer parts of the country, notably Kabul.

BY JAMES RUPERT FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Some of several hundred Afghan refugees who for several months had been awaiting ration cards at Shamshatu camp south of Peshawar, Pakistan, below.

Below, residents of Pirangi display ge field.

BY JAMES RUPERT FOR THE WASHINGTON POST



BY JAMES RUPERT FOR THE WASHINGTON POST